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"FILMS IN INDIA"

by

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India has a population of 390 millions (increasing at the rate of 5 million a year), 85% of which are reported to be illiterate. Add to this the shockingly low per capita income and the result is at least one explanation of why India leads the world in film production - cheap entertainment. Unfortunately, Indian film production is largely stereotyped, most features run to 16 reels with several devoted to singing and dancing and any relationship which these may have to the theme of the film is purely coincidental. To further complicate matters, films are produced in 13 regional languages, there being as yet, no national language. In contrast the production of information and educational films in India is rather discouraging on the commercial side, as represented by Indian Documentary Producers Association, the industry is less well organized than it is in Canada, in spite of the vast difference in population and correspondingly larger potential.

The role of films in India's vast program of emancipation and development is a relatively meagre one. The Film Unit of the Central Government grinds out a weekly newsreel and occasional information film, the showing of which is compulsory in theatres, and then releases prints in 16 mm. Several state governments both produce and distribute information films but their efforts are largely localized and there is little interchange of usable material between states, partly due to language differences. Outside of the theatres therefore the supply of films is hopelessly inadequate and any film showing, regardless of the subject or the language, is bound to attract huge crowds. Just what value such showings have is a moot point and perhaps the best that might be said of them is that they provide some distraction from the humdrum routine of everyday life among people who enjoy few amenities.

What about the use of films "as a medium of information and a tool of learning"? There is an impressively growing volume of the use of films in this direction, in community development projects, in national extension block developments, in schools, colleges and universities. To consider the accomplishments in the proper perspective however, it must be borne in mind that India with 85 towns and cities has 556,000 villages, some of which are quite large. Always on the sub-continent one is confronted with the overwhelming number of people and places. Hundreds or even thousands of examples of functional film use against this background of numbers represents only a meagre beginning in the exploitation of this useful medium.

Apart from film supply, India shares with other countries such handicaps as scanty rural electrification and shortages of equipment. The bulk of the 16mm projectors in use throughout India have been brought in through the various aid programs from the U.S. and Commonwealth countries. Foreign exchange controls on hard currency areas virtually prohibit the importation of both films and equipment by non-governmental agencies and organizations although some equipment is now being marketed from countries behind the Iron Curtain.

Because of these shortages the mobile unit is regarded as the practical means of taking the films to the people so both central and state government departments, as well as a number of foreign agencies, operate vans equipped with P.A. systems and all the essentials for motion picture showings. It is somewhat remarkable that in spite of the role which audio-visuals can play in India's program of development, no steps have yet been taken for the indigenous manufacture of projection equipment. While on

the surface this may appear a lamentable oversight, it has to be considered in relation to the overall problems on this sub-continent which include such things as 45 million children of elementary school ages (6 to 11) for which there are no school facilities.

What is the relationship of Canada's N.F.B. to all this? Again one must revert to statistics in order to get some impression of the potential. Recent figures estimate that 30% of the literate population are conversant with English so in round figures there is an English speaking population equivalent to the total population of Canada. In addition there are several hundred schools, both government and sectarian in which English is the medium of teaching. While the preponderance of English speaking adults are concentrated in the urban centres there is still a widespread field for the distribution of Canadian information films with English language sound tracks.

N.F.B. films play an important role in Canada's overall information program abroad through Canadian Posts and offices. Unfortunately the limitations on staff and wide range of other responsibilities result, from the point of view of a "film man" anyway, in the films not getting the attention they merit. Faced with the problem of making the best of existing circumstances it seemed advisable to adapt if possible, some of the methods developed in Canada, to the Indian scene. Methods under which we help people to help themselves and that are fortunately a basic principle in fundamental education. Just how well this has worked out can be seen from the following comparison:, in the first quarter of the present fiscal year, our film library in New Delhi reported 911 films ahown against 776 for the entire year of 1956-57, with a corresponding increase in total audiences. This has been achieved by the introduction of more efficient handling procedures within the library itself and more important, by placing blocks of films on deposit with state and university film libraries and by organizing circulating film block distribution. An experimental project with the Delhi Public Library, the first we believe in India, has launched it into providing a service of films and equipment to local organizations as a logical adjunct of the library's activities in the field of cultural development. In New Delhi, with its vast population of Government employees, an association runs outdoor showings on a year round basis at one of the large colonies. Three or four showings a week with audiences ranging up to 2000 are gradually resulting in Canadian films becoming better known and in turn these people are becoming a little more familiar with Canada. Fortunately Canadian films are extremely popular and never a week goes by without some comment extolling their virtues and quality.

Apart from the role of films in the general information program, there has been considerable expansion of selective programming to meet specific needs. Films on Health, Agriculture, Forestry, Industrial Accident Prevention, Labour Relations, Human Relationships, and a number of other subject fields. There is also a growing interest in group discussion developed around the presentation of a film and our two films "LET'S DISCUSS IT and "LET'S TALK ABOUT FILMS", are in constant demand. Workshops on Film Appreciation, Film Utilization, Films in Fundamental Education and a variety of similar themes result in a steady demand for the services of the NFB's Asian representative, and provide ample opportunities for the use of the written material on film discussion which originated in Canada. A considerable amount of this has been reproduced in India in periodical and pamphlet form.

As a part of N.F.B.'s world-wide versioning program a few films are already available in some of the indigenous languages, namely Hindi, Bengali and Urdu. Arrangements have been completed for an accelerated program of versioning to include other languages such as Tamil and Gujarati. It has to be borne in mind however, that language versions are largely directed to rural audiences whose concepts of life, customs and practices are in the main limited to their own narrow environments. Films depicting situations which are foreign to these concepts are quite likely to be misinterpreted, regardless of the commentary, unless carefully selected as having some basis of common understanding. For example, the condemned dwellings in FAREWELL OAK STREET appear sumptuous as compared with an Indian hovel and the classroom experiment in FOOD FCR FREDDY, evokes a protest over wasting food on rats from people who are primarily undernourished. Fortunately human nature varies little so whenever a film begins with a common denominator, it has a useful role to play in broadening concepts and in challenging outmoded practices.

Last, but by no means least, the use of Canadian films by theatres using English language features is steadily increasing and the demand for the purchase of 16 mm prints and filmstrips is limited only by foreign exchange controls, which unfortunately, curtail imports by some 80%. The fact that Canadian information films are found both useful and popular in India is however, the most important element. With this as a stimulant, it is only a question of time until solutions are found to the problem of increased supply.

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AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT FILMS FOR PURCHASE

We take pleasure in announcing that CFI has been appointed distributor for sale of films of the Australian Government. Descriptions of new Australian films now available will be carried in the December issue of the Bulletin.
Catalogues of Australian Films are available from CFL

FILMS FROM BRITAIN Catalogue

Films of the United Kingdom Information Service are distributed for preview with a view to purchase and on a service charge basis by Canadian Film Institute.

For preview of UKIS films in provinces other than Ontario contact your nearest depot film library.....

Eastern Canada contact Teachers' College, Fredericton

Quebec Contact Cinematheque Universitaire Laval, Quebec

Manitoba Alberta and Saskatchewan contact University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon.

British Columbia, contact University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B C.

The 1958-59 Films From Britain is now available. Write CFI for copies.